

Case Study: How relationships make real change to a healthier lifestyle, and the impacts of change on childhood.

The challenge? Sometimes we see the signs that families need support to address a health issue, and call them in for meetings, send them for support, work with them and do what we can to address the issue. But sometimes that alone just doesn't make a difference. The worry continues, and this can be representative for many health issues.

However, sometimes there are great successes; so when these happen, we really should celebrate them, and definitely learn from them. With the consent of practitioners and, of course, the young person himself, we are going to present an appreciative inquiry completed with the young person, and his key supporting professionals through his weight-loss journey. We think you'll be as overwhelmed as we are with the experience he has had, more so with his own reflections on the impact and outcome of lifestyle changes.

So let us share the background. A Healthy Lifestyle Advisor (HLA) was asked to support the young person in April 2019 due to concerns about his weight. This team provide 12 week family interventions plus 3, 6 and 12 month's follow-up sessions. There were worries for the young person whilst he was living with his mum, as professionals were worried about mum's mental health, and how this meant that he wasn't eating healthy foods, and he was having to do a lot of looking after himself and other people in his family. The HLA spent some positive time with the young person, and agreed a plan to support him moving forwards; sadly, his mum wasn't around for home visits, and mum didn't take him to appointments at the dietician that were made for him either. In the meantime, the young person started to be supported by his School and the School Nurse. The predominant feature of work with him at this point was to build a relationship to support the transition into the next phase of his education and also being aware of social difficulties he was facing as a result of his lived experiences. An important note here is to highlight that school attendance has been as low as 19% and therefore building a trusting relationship was an additional challenge from everyone's perspective.

Children's Social Care became involved to support the family, and the young person moved to live with his father. This was a positive first step in the journey for this young person, where new routines began to form, and motivation was generated from greater exposure to structure, healthier living and promotion of exercise and positive choices. His father invested positively in his health, and supported him to make changes. However, several months after this arrangement was agreed, he entered foster care. Whilst we can never underestimate the negative impact of these significant transitions and moves, the young person reflects positively on the contribution he made to these decisions, as well as the

support he received. So, let's hear all about the impact of this health journey, for this young person.

DISCOVERING THE HIGH POINT – From January to September 2020, the young person managed to lose around 6 stone in weight, most of that within the first 5 months. He would account this to the RELATIONSHIPS he had around him, and the support received. The



An image of young people playing a rugby game.

change in environments helped too, of course, but for him, it really was about the support. He said one of the biggest differences was that “I listened to other people who all pushed me to start different routines, like doing Joe Wicks in the morning, and rugby in school. It was a bunch of people who helped, especially my dad, his wife, friends and my foster carer”. It helped him realise “I don't like video games as much as I thought I did”. He also

identified the moment he realised his whole lifestyle had changed, and it was a particularly proud moment for him when he went to rugby practice and played for 4 hours straight - “I could do it without thinking”. He is proud that his day-to-day life has been changed so dramatically by his weight loss and that he can now do things which are “normal” for most children - he should be proud.

He is now described to be unrecognisable, mostly for how he has gained in CONFIDENCE. The relationships he built have strengthened and his trust in those relationships is reflective of the time invested in them. He said “knowing people were there for only me, really helped”. His School support worked long and hard to build rapport and use opportunities to share his journey with his peers and staff. After all, health is something that is important to us all. Let us role model it, right?

HOPES FOR SUCCESS – It has been a powerful experience, through this appreciative inquiry, to learn about this young person's willingness to make changes. He shared “I guess this may be a struggle as things slow down, and I lose motivation, and I probably lost it half-way through, but I choose to stay active. I recognise there is a risk for this to slow down again but this is my life now, this is about how I live my life now. I care about myself”.

THE DREAM – Despite the success, the change in lifestyle and the ambition to sustain a new way of life, he would want to look back on this and be reminded that he did it, and he can keep doing it. He would suggest there are 3 key things to help with this kind of journey...

Belief in the ability to change, but make it normal. **Support** - don't give up, and don't let other's give up on you. The plan is important, so stick to it. And lastly, **Recognition**; this can

simply be a smile - it doesn't have to be big compliments - it's about being there, caring, but recognising what is happening and the being, as it helps.

The professionals agree with the young person entirely. SUPPORT and RELATIONSHIPS have made the difference here, evidently so (and not taking away the young person's determination and healthy choices and the nutritional food and advice provided in **home** and **school**) but it is clear that the real success here is the young person, being supported to change by family and professionals, really *feeling* all of that support. They are so proud that he is happy. The relationship ripple has continued and, proudly, his school attendance improved from 19% to 83% in one academic year. It now stands at 100%. Relationships really do count for a lot.

LEARNING POINTS:

REFLECT on your own practice – how do you currently support children, young people and their families? What else can your service do to support change for healthier choices and to re-engage networks and promote role models within this? RELATIONSHIPS are absolutely key – make sure there is time afforded to allow trust and meaning to be established to enable REAL CHANGE to happen.

This case study is reflective of this young person's weight loss journey, but what is clear is that the impact of change, and narrative surrounding it, is grounded in relationship-based practice. These are the skills to work on and are transferable to all practice. The environment is, of course, important but nurturing existing relationships will always support change in a meaningful way. Altering the environment alone *can* amend the routines but, without existing relationships that provide support, belief, feelings of belonging and self-worth, the environment alone will do little to engage and maintain meaningful change.

The appreciative inquiry undertaken was a reflective opportunity to understand why something has worked and to help consolidate the learning. All parties found it impressive to understand the impact for this young person, not just his weight loss - it has been about the change in lifestyle and the impact this has had on his day-to-day living. Realising things about himself that he did not know before and really valuing the quality of a relationship in how it provides support for change. It was his plan, guided by professional advice that worked – because people showed him they cared and they continue to care. This is invaluable learning and we are grateful we have been part of this journey.

Young Person's views: He is happy with his achievements, but genuinely accounts his success to everyone that supported him, as much as to himself.

Upon reading this study, he said "I really liked it. Made me smile".